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The Return of the Kurdish Question

On the Situation of the Kurds in Iraq, Syria and Turkey

Günter Seufert

For decades, the roughly twenty-nine million Kurds living in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria were regarded primarily as a threat to the territorial integrity of those states and thus to the stability of the Middle East. Today the region is marked by state collapse, rampant terrorism, and signs of unravelling in the established system of states. These developments have brought about fundamental changes in the position of the Kurds and the role they play in regional politics.

While the situation is most precarious in Syria and Iraq, whose national unity is currently largely theoretical, several other states are also experiencing major political difficulties in regard to the political integration of linguistically and confessionally diverse populations. In certain quarters, strategists are already drawing a completely new set of frontiers for the Middle East – changes that would leave neither Jordan, Lebanon, Israel nor even Turkey untouched.

Kurds and Jihadists

The immediate threat to state unity is not war between states, but conflicts involving non-state armed groups (NSAGs) that build largely on ethnic/linguistic and religious/confessional identities. In other words, NSAGs fighting states or other NSAGs.

The two most important non-state armed currents in the Middle East are the Salafist/jihadist Sunni Muslim formations, such as

the “Islamic State” (IS) and the al-Qaeda offshoot al-Nusra, and the various strands of the Kurdish national movement in Iraq, Turkey and Syria.

Thus, alongside a tremendous upsurge of violent Islamism, the region is experiencing a hitherto unseen renaissance of Kurdish politics. The Iraqi Kurds hope for an opportunity to declare independence, which would hasten the dissolution of Iraq. In Turkey the government’s peace talks with the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) have run aground and full-blown war is bound to restart. In Syria the Kurds will be unable to hold their autonomous regions without Western assistance. Any withdrawal of the Syrian Kurdish PYD would risk another wave of ethnic cleansing. The humanitarian crisis and associated refugee flows from Syria and Iraq, the necessity to reestablish a viable regional order, and its own energy dependency may force Europe to rethink its policy towards the Kurds.

The Iraqi Kurds' Desire for Statehood

Drawing on US assistance, the Iraqi Kurds have created an autonomous federal entity recognised by Baghdad, in which Masud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) is the strongest political force. The military support supplied by Iran when the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) came under IS attack demonstrates that the Kurdish entity in Iraq is treated as a legitimate factor in the region today, as does Turkey's close cooperation. The US intervention to defend the Iraqi Kurds against IS advances, and arms deliveries from Germany and the Czech Republic, both underline the international recognition of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq.

The Iraqi Kurds have postponed but not abandoned their wish for independence. Despite most of the feared consequences having already occurred, Western states refuse to consider statehood for the Iraqi Kurds on the grounds that it would threaten the internal cohesion of Iraq and boost Kurdish autonomy movements in neighbouring states. At the same time, a series of factors feeds the desire for independence: closer diplomatic and military ties between Erbil and the West created by the fighting against IS; close economic cooperation between the Iraqi Kurds and Turkey; and worsening mutual hostility between Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq. The latter, above all, casts a pall over the future of the Iraqi state. Another factor favouring statehood is the ongoing failure of Baghdad and Erbil to reach a final agreement on disputed areas claimed by both (including Kirkuk) and the sharing of oil and gas reserves. Other factors mitigate against moving towards statehood, for instance mistrust and rivalry between the major political groupings of the Iraqi Kurds: the KDP, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Gorran Party. In 1998 the rivalry reached such heights that American mediation was required to defuse armed clashes. Tensions between the KDP and the PKK and grave deficits in the institutional structures and

political culture of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) also speak against embarking upon the adventure of statehood. In view of the gamut of uncontrollable variables, Europe cannot simply pick one option or another. Instead, Europe should push for maximum compromise between Erbil and Baghdad and work with the KRG in Iraqi Kurdistan to bring about long-term improvements in infrastructure, institutions and democracy. With respect to tensions among the Kurds, the establishment of a pan-Kurdish public sphere should be encouraged. That is important both for directing the rivalry between the Iraqi Kurdish parties into peaceful channels, and for keeping ongoing conflicts between the KDP and the PKK in check. In the short term, additional humanitarian assistance for refugees is required. The KRG should also continue to receive military support for its fight against IS, with equipment and training adapted to the circumstances. Disruption of internal Kurdish and Iraqi power balances should be avoided.

Turkey's Policy towards Kurdistan-Iraq

Erbil's relations with Ankara are still delicate, despite intense recent economic and energy cooperation serving mutual interests. While Turkey was still presenting itself as Iraqi Kurdistan's guarantor in June 2014, it failed to intervene when IS attacked three months later. Ankara has vacillated in recent years, adopting a series of very different attitudes towards Kurdish autonomy in Iraq – from strict rejection to recognition and finally declaration of the Kurds' right to independence. Turkey's policy towards Kurdish Northern Iraq is strongly influenced by whatever strategy it is pursuing towards the PKK at a particular moment, and therefore tends to be unreliable. Where Ankara once feared that greater self-government for Kurdistan-Iraq would directly boost the autonomy demands of the Turkish Kurds, today it hopes that Masud Barzani might stem the influence of PKK leader

Abdullah Öcalan. A further element of uncertainty is Turkish designs on the former Ottoman provinces of Mosul and Kirkuk. Whether under Turgut Özal (1983–1993) or in Ahmet Davutoğlu's foreign policy speculations: Ankara regards Mosul and Kirkuk as potential additions to Turkey. Such ideas, like the instrumentalisation of the Iraqi Kurds against the Turkish, cannot be said to contribute to regional stabilisation. Europe should therefore work for a political consolidation of the KRG's relations with Baghdad, while also pushing for an understanding between the KDP and the PKK, which would have to involve both sides.

An Assessment of the Syrian Kurdish PYD

Although the Democratic Union Party (PYD) occupies a hegemonic position among the organisations of Syria's Kurds, various factors have earned it a great deal of criticism and led the German government to refuse contact. The main objections are its very close connections to the PKK, its refusal to join the Sunni Arab-dominated opposition to Assad, its at least intermittent cooperation with Damascus, and repression against rival Kurdish parties. But the party's strategic decision to concentrate on defending Kurdish areas within Syria and establishing local self-administration must in retrospect be acknowledged as the best choice for the Kurdish population. The same applies to its partial cooperation with Damascus, which must be seen in the context of a series of pragmatic temporary alliances between opposing forces in the civil war. It must also be emphasised that the PYD is strongly rooted in the Kurdish population of northern Syria, that it pursues a progressive policy on women, and that it involves non-Kurds and non-Muslims in its administration. Just how seriously it takes the integration of non-Muslim Kurds was demonstrated in summer 2014, when it saved the Kurdish-speaking Yazidis in the Iraqi Sinjar Mountains from the clutches of

the IS in an operation that demonstrated the fighting strength of the PYD guerrillas. Ultimately it is decisive for the Kurds – and for the Assyrian Christians of northern Syria – that there is no alternative to military protection by the PYD and the administration it dominates. Considering the Syrian Kurds' legitimate interest in self-organisation and security, the demise of the moderate Sunni Arab opposition and the poor prospects for an undivided Syria, the blanket refusal of German politicians to deal directly with the PYD can no longer be justified. Germany's Western allies have long since gone other ways. The United States and the United Kingdom maintain extremely close military cooperation with the YPG guerrilla units of the PYD, whose political representatives have been received officially in Washington at senior official level and in Rome and Paris at ministerial and presidential level respectively. Even Turkey, where the president and prime minister never tire of equating the PYD with the "Islamic State", the party's co-leader has been received for talks several times.

The Turkish State's Negotiations with the PKK

The thirty-year armed struggle of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has forced the Turkish state to abandon its policy of denying the existence of a Kurdish nation with its own language and culture. In March 2013, after the PKK ceased fighting in 2012, Ankara opened the first official peace talks with PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, who has been imprisoned since 1999. However, the two sides were pursuing contradictory goals. The government wished to negotiate only about disarming the PKK and reintegrating its fighters into society, and otherwise regarded the Kurdish question as having been resolved through earlier concessions of a cultural nature. The governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) invoked Muslim brotherhood between Turks and Kurds and sought to subsume

the Kurds in a conservative Sunni religious Turkey. The PKK, on the other hand, insisted on guarantees of political democratisation and decentralisation designed to open the door to Kurdish self-administration within Turkey. It continues to see the Kurds as an independent, sovereign entity, and itself and its legal arm, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), as their authentic representatives.

The Kurds long believed the only way to force the government to make concessions was by threatening to resume the armed struggle, and that this route would close after the parliamentary elections on 7 June 2015; after that, they feared, they would again be at a disadvantage. In the months leading up to the election, therefore, matters appeared to be coming to a head. But in December 2014 the Kurds switched to a strategy of deescalation, with the PKK emphasising that it had turned its back on the armed struggle. In March 2015, Öcalan announced that he would call a congress to officially end the PKK's guerrilla war against the Turkish state. However, he said, the decision was conditional on the establishment of a monitoring council, a parliamentary commission, a truth commission, and a government declaration of intent to negotiate over political reforms.

The Pro-Kurdish Party as New Beacon of Hope

In conjunction with this strategic turn by the PKK towards a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question within the borders of Turkey, the closely associated legal pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) also altered its programme. On the one hand, it sent out feelers to left-wing opposition forces not represented in parliament and sought to forge electoral alliances. On the other, it declared itself the champion of all marginalised groups in Turkey. In line with its demand for recognition of all cultural and political identities, the HDP granted promising places on its list for the parliamentary elections on 7 June 2015 not

only to Sunni Kurdish candidates, but also to representatives of the Muslim Alevi minority, Christians, Jews, as well as trade unionists, environmentalists, gays and lesbians.

The success of this strategy, with which the Kurds were able to double their vote to 13.1 percent for 79 seats in parliament, stemmed not only from this reorientation, but was also aided by the line taken by the governing party. Under the influence of its former leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the AKP built its election campaign entirely around the idea of introducing a presidential system to legalise and consolidate an emerging presidential autocracy of steadily growing strength. That represented a nightmare not only for liberal forces, but also for the Kemalist elite and in general for the secular sections of the population, and turned the Kurdish national movement, which had for decades been regarded as the central threat to the integrity of the state, into what growing numbers of Turks now regarded as the standard-bearer of democracy. And indeed, in the 7 June election the HDP received about 900,000 votes from ethnic Turkish voters, most of whom had previously voted for the CHP. This accounted for 2 of the HDP's 13 percentage points.

PKK/HDP as Representative of the Kurdish National Movement in Turkey

Ultimately, it was Erdoğan himself who drove voters into the arms of the HDP by alienating the AKP's Kurdish supporters, who switched their allegiance en masse (the other main parties, CHP and MHP, had no base among the Kurds to start with). In the campaign, Erdoğan courted extreme nationalist, anti-Kurdish sentiments and rejected any idea of future negotiations. As such, he continued a course of confrontation set in autumn 2014, when he offended many Kurds by equating the resistance of the PKK and its Syrian offshoot PYD in the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane with the

Islamic State. Erdoğan's unintended assistance allowed the HDP to attract conservative and religious Kurds on a grand scale, who had until then distanced themselves from the left-wing secular ideology of the PKK. Integrating large numbers of conservative Kurds into its voting base has made the HDP the hegemonic party in the Kurdish areas of eastern and south-eastern Turkey for the first time. In 2011, its predecessor, the BDP, was the strongest force in only seven of the eastern and south-eastern provinces. By 2015, the picture had been transformed, with the pro-Kurdish party winning in fourteen provinces, thirteen of them forming a contiguous area along the southern and eastern borders. In almost all of these, one can speak of clear hegemony, with the HDP falling below 50 percent only in Ardahan and Kars (31 and 45 percent respectively). These latter two provinces lie in the extreme north-east, where Kurds are not a majority. In all the other twelve provinces the HDP gained a clear absolute majority: Iğdır 57 percent, Bitlis 61, Dersim (Tunceli) 61, Siirt 66, Muş 72, Batman 73, Van 74, Mardin 74, Ağrı 79, Diyarbakir 80, Şırnak 86, and Hakkari 88 percent. In two neighbouring provinces, Urfa and Bingöl, the HDP came second with 40 and 42 percent respectively.

Another aspect of the election result underlines what a great step the HDP has taken on the road to becoming the party of all the Kurds: It was also the strongest party in the province of Dersim (Tunceli), which is geographically separated from the Sunni Kurdish area and is largely populated by Alevi Kurds. In earlier elections, scepticism towards their Sunni compatriots had led the Alevis of Dersim to vote for the CHP in large numbers. So the HDP has not only succeeded – like earlier pro-Kurdish parties – in gaining the votes of left-wing and relatively secular Kurds, but also achieved a majority among religious Sunni and more secular Alevi Kurds. And this applies not only to the provinces of south-eastern Anatolia, but also to the majority Kurdish

quarters in eight of Turkey's thirteen biggest cities.

The End of the Peace Process

In the election, the AKP's vote dropped from 49.9 to 40.8 percent, losing it its absolute majority. The euphoria this triggered among the opposition, including the Kurds, was short-lived, however. Ideological differences between the three opposition parties exclude them from forming a government without the AKP, so Erdoğan and the AKP continue to dominate politics. With the President delaying the formation of a government and calling for the election to be repeated, the AKP has sharpened its course against the Kurds in the hope of winning back Turkish nationalist voters. Erdoğan, thus, continued his pre-election strategy: already on 28 April he had declared the end of negotiations with the PKK and labelled as terrorists and separatists all those who still put forward Kurdish demands. The hopes of the Kurds that state and government would return to negotiations after the election vanished into thin air. Ever since it began withdrawing its fighters in connection with the commencement of talks in 2013, the PKK has complained that new military outposts and transport routes were being built in the region to secure the Turkish army's superiority in any future fighting. On 11 July, after new waves of arrests by the police and a growing number of skirmishes with the military, the PKK announced it would end the armistice unless ongoing expansion of military bases ceased and mass arrests stopped. The reactions of the liberal public to this step were divided. On the one hand there was understanding. After all it was the president who broke off the talks without meeting any of the PKK's final, moderate demands, and it was the government that cut every contact between PKK leader Öcalan and the HDP negotiation group after Erdoğan declared the talks ended, now four months ago. On the other, there was great disillusionment. It was, after all, the PKK's orientation on a longer-

term process that presented the opportunity to prevent a resumption of the civil war. Despite the radical rhetoric of both sides, the cease-fire held until the Islamic State bomb attack in the Turkish-Kurdish border town of Suruç on 20 July that killed thirty-two young people. The PKK accused the government of siding with IS and “retaliated” with attacks on police that left three dead. On 24 July Turkish jets began bombing PKK strongholds in Northern Iraq, claiming to have killed up to two hundred fighters by the end of July. At the same time, more than one thousand people have been detained in operations supposedly directed against “terror organisations” including IS, but mainly focussing on Kurdish activists. Fully fledged civil war is thus back in Turkey.

This is regrettable, because there is in principle agreement in Turkey that the Kurdish question must be resolved and a new constitution drafted. Will the now defunct Kemalist order be replaced in the long term by an authoritarian system based on a conservative majority – on supporters of the AKP and the MHP – and increasingly legitimised in terms of Islamic morals and terminology? Or can a culturally largely neutral legal and institutional framework for politics be created?

Given the choice between these options, Turkey finds itself facing similar structural challenges to other states in the Middle East, even if a range of factors leave it significantly more socially, institutionally and economically integrated than its southern neighbours. Nonetheless: Turkey also has great problems politically integrating a population politicised and organised along cultural lines.

In view of this, the future strategy of the PKK will play a central role for the fate of the political system and the stability of the country. Germany and Europe should seek ways and means to influence the PKK and strengthen those forces within the organisation that wish to return to a peaceful long-term strategy. Ignoring the PKK as a political force and treating it exclusively as a terrorist organisation is no longer

compatible with either the domestic political situation in Turkey or the regional political developments.

The Role of the Kurds in the Middle East

What role can and should the Kurds play in a Middle East whose future has become so unpredictable? The question arises for both strands of the Kurdish national movement: the Kurds of Iraq, today under the leadership of Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP); and the Turkish and Syrian Kurds, where the formations around the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) represent the strongest force. The Kurdish drive for greater self-government has become virtually impossible to ignore – and not simply because these two Kurdish currents are today partners of the West in the fight against the Islamic State. In this connection it is also relevant that the Kurds operate as secular currents, and in comparison to the nation-states in the region exhibit a greater willingness to concede equal rights to non-Kurdish and non-Muslim groups and integrate them politically. Irrespective of their different characters, their internal rivalries and their obvious democratic deficits, both Kurdish groupings are also seeking recognition in the United States and Europe. At the same time they challenge Iraq and Turkey, as states whose stability is crucial for both the region and the West. To that extent the two strands are today factors promoting both stability and instability. Assessments of the direction they will take are contingent upon the future one imagines for the Middle East. It can be said with certainty that there is no way back to the former state order, for the process that has gripped the system of states in the Middle East continues unabated.

The Uncertain Future of the System of States in the Middle East

The state order in the Middle East dates from the First World War and was largely

defined by European powers. On 16 May 1916, France and England concluded the Sykes-Picot Agreement dividing eastern Anatolia and Mesopotamia, at that time still provinces of the Ottoman Empire, into British and French dominions and spheres of influence. The Russian Revolution and the successful Turkish war of independence prevented the Agreement's implementation in Anatolia. The roots of both the creation of Syria and the Lebanon under French mandate and the founding of Iraq, Jordan and Israel under British mandate are to be found in the Agreement of 1916. The decision of the victorious powers to draw the borders of the new states – unlike those in Europe – without heed to the linguistic/ethnic and religious/confessional allegiances of the population was to have far-reaching implications. Worse still, the mandate powers built their administration of the new states on confessional minorities: France on the Alevis in Syria, England on the Sunnis in Iraq. The associated exclusion of major linguistic and religious groups contributed to a politicisation of existing ethnic and confessional identities. The same also applies to the Kurds, who never became an integral component of the power structures of the modern nation-state, but were marginalised and pressured to assimilate in the name of Turkish, Arab and Persian nationalism.

After the end of the Cold War, the major powers in East and West curtailed their support for authoritarian regimes in the region, while global discourses about equality, political participation and democracy became increasingly relevant. Rising levels of education, burgeoning information and communication technologies, and the global networking of formerly regional and local groups enabled by those developments empowered the de facto largely disenfranchised citizens of authoritarian states to become political radicalising actors organising in the name of traditional identities. There is no end in sight to this development and the collapse of state order it engenders. The states of the Middle East

have to date utterly failed to respond and integrate the protests. On the contrary, ethnic cleansing, the associated cultural homogenisation and the establishment of new quasi-state structures (for example by IS) represent worrying harbingers of major upheavals still to come. This is the background to the scenarios of a Middle East redivided along cultural lines that are today being developed in many quarters.

Guidelines for European Policy towards the Kurds

However developments turn out, such scenarios certainly lie within the realm of the possible. This alone is an imperative to involve not only the existing states as partners in conflict resolution concepts and measures, but also the semi-state and non-state armed actors with which common political ground exists – and those include the Kurds. European engagement in the region should be directed towards resolving conflicts through peaceful transformation and negotiation. Therefore the actions of European powers can no longer be restricted to supporting the authoritarian policies of nation-states against their Kurdish minorities. This strategy has long since lost its potential for creating stability. But nor can European policy towards the Kurds consist exclusively of unconditional solidarity with their various political demands. For it is the radical solutions on either side that contain the greatest potential for violence. What is needed is a de-escalating policy seeking considered compromise and communication. And such a policy can only function if its protagonists consider multiple alternative development paths and open channels of communication with all concerned – including on the Kurdish side.

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